

Walter Benjamin's Conception of Experience: A Way of Thinking about Otherness in Educational Context

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In the context of educational practice and research, the individual is often understood in terms of autonomy. From this point of view, we will see our experience as cumulative, as inside of us, and as strengthening us against others. It means that the conception of experience tends to be understood primarily in relation to usefulness. In search of aspects of experience that are different from this kind of understanding, this paper scrutinises Walter Benjamin's conception of experience, as expressed in his essay on Proust, in order to bring to light the most vivid aspects of experience.

It begins by explaining the modern situation, in which the individual is confined in itself in terms of the distinction Benjamin draws between modern novels and stories. Next, it reconsiders experience in literature. Benjamin realises that experience as it appears in literature shows us the unknown or the strange—and hence otherness to ourselves. Consideration of Benjamin's reading of Proust helps us to realise an otherness not within but to ourselves.

The paper goes on to consider "involuntary memory" in terms of what Benjamin calls our "muscular activity"—that is, our act. It is important to recognise that Benjamin thinks of experience in a "dual style"—that is, in terms of the tension between what is other to ourselves and our own act, as is exemplified in writing. Our writing should be understood in terms of receptiveness to a now-time that constellates the fragments of the irretrievable past.

In conclusion it is argued that otherness can invade the self and destroy our common sense or ordinary being, in Benjamin's sense. In the light of this, it becomes possible to see experience not only as a reinforcement of our autonomous selves but as an opening onto the yet unknown, which enables us to touch the depths of our lives beyond usefulness.

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1. Introduction: Poverty of Experience?

It was not so long ago that Walter Benjamin wrote in “Experience and Poverty”: “[w]here do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that past from generation to the next like a precious ring? (...) No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value” (Benjamin, 1999, p.731). The idea of the poverty of experience is not new anymore, and this point of view is related to the end of grand narrative in the postmodern situation. With regard to this situation and with the proliferation of qualitative studies in educational research, there has been a growth in “narrative research” like case studies. The focal point for the search for solutions to educational problems has now shifted to the collection and decipherment of its narratives.

There is no doubt that considering narrative is crucially important for educational theorising and practice. It opens us a way to see the educational reality that is formed in our narrative for the first time. In this sense, the end of grand narrative is a chance to hear and capture voices that have had no words to express them in the context of educational grand narrative. However, if “grand” is conveniently replaced with “individual” narratives, there are problems that arise. As Paul Standish points out, “narrative strengthens a concept of the authentic self that is romanticized or sentimentalized” (Standish, 2007, p. 63). Naoko Saito also criticises “narrative education that tends to mourn and look back upon one’s past miseries in the mode of resentment” (Saito, 2003, p. 188).

If we place too much emphasis on the importance of self-narrative, there is a danger that we focus too much attention on matters of conscious decision, and things that we cannot scrutinise consciously will be missed, namely otherness to ourselves. To focus on the individual (the subject of research) looks good because it seems to involve a kind of respect for that person, but there is a down-side to this. One reason against focusing only on self-narrative is that it may unwittingly put too much emphasis on the idea of the individual as fully autonomous, as responsible for their situation, and so cause us to be less sensitive to the ways that the broader context has shaped their actions and experience. From the point of view that sees individual with autonomy, we see our experience as cumulative, as inside of us, and as strengthening us against what is outside of us. It seems that there is the reduction of the concept of experience to be the assumption of usefulness. Here is my focal point: the concept of experience needs to be reconsidered from the perspective of otherness to ourselves.

In this paper I will try to show the conception of experience in Benjamin’s text. By so doing, I seek vivid aspects of experience that enable us to touch the depths of our life beyond mere usefulness. In order to understand this conception, Benjamin’s study on Proust titled “The Image of Proust” (1934), especially in relation to *In Search of Lost Time*, can help us. My paper is formed of three main sections. First, the individual who is closed and complete in oneself will be reconsidered in the light of Benjamin’s differentiation between modern novels and stories. Second, to overcome the confinement of the individual, Proust’s “involuntary memory” will be illustrated. Third, further attention will be given to the tension between involuntary memory that is the cue it gives for writing experience and a muscular activity that is our act. In a conclusion I will show Benjamin’s conception of experience in terms of awakening experience.

2. The Confinement of the Individual

The point that Standish makes could be related to Benjamin's point of view in respect of modern novels. As Benjamin puts this,

The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none. To write a novel is to take that which is incommensurable in the representation of human existence to the extreme (Benjamin, 1999, p. 299).

In novels we can see a whole of life that has no relationship with our own life, just as we can with a TV show or a webpage. Sometimes these will just be entertainment, a way for killing time. Sometimes they provoke people but they cannot give us counsel or advice because these are complete in themselves; they have definite beginnings and ends.¹

In the light of this, the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century is connected by Benjamin with a certain emergence of the self—that is to say, with the self-contained individual. Just as the novel, in its book form, is closed and complete in itself, so there is an understanding of the self as closed and complete—we might say “autonomous”—in this way. If we think of the individual only in this way, the boundary between “I” (the self) and “you” (the other self) could be reinforced. To compete against others, the individual needs to be equipped with useful knowledge, skills, and experience. In educational practice teachers provide their students with these useful pieces of experience so that the students can use them in appropriate situations to solve their problems, as if with a manual. As I mentioned above, however, these useful experiences can be useful only for a short while in this modern age. Thus, students always are rushed to catch up with a new usefulness of the age.

Benjamin contrasts the novel as a form representing these ideas with what he calls “story”. Stories, in Benjamin's sense, can be passed by word of mouth, and this has happened for generations. The experience of being absorbed in the story precedes the producing of another story. People/children become a story itself. We can see this kind of moment from a playing child. There is no distance between play and the child itself for a playing child. When a child plays he accepts the world, and the world accepts the child. Not only people but also the sounds of snowing or the smells of flowers can whisper a story to a child. Furthermore, stories are not inward but shared and communal; they are experienced in a public world. They are the reason why people share the same values and concerns. People, Benjamin says, share the same cues for particular thoughts—the church bell rings and there is no doubt about its significance. In the modern world, by contrast, we are confronted by things that are insignificant at first. More precisely, we do not know what the significant cues are for our experience. As in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) Benjamin says:

To have combined recognition of a quality with the measurement of the quantity was the work of the calendars in which the places of recollection are left blank, as it were, in the form of holidays. The man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels as though he is dropped from the calendar (Benjamin, 1968, p. 181).

According to Benjamin, now there are no stories like this. In a sense, we can say that we

all watch the same TV show, for example. However, contrary to experience through stories, people cannot put themselves deeply into the TV show, because before they can get the cue for their experience, the screen changes, immediately and continuously.² Unlike stories, TV disenables people from acquiring experience. People are watching the same TV show but the meaning of “communal” is completely different. There is no preceding experience immersing them in what they heard. However Benjamin never mourns nor neglects such modern situations; rather he is interested in possibilities of their being changed.³ He prefers to walk into where we are now, in where everything has destroyed, and to try to start a new way of writing of experience in the face of this very situation. Benjamin’s response to the poverty of experience is not to seek to recover the past or stories; it is not nostalgic.⁴ Instead he recognises the debris but tries to find a narrow path between the debris.

This contrasts with the concept of experience that is understood in ordinary education, which is influenced by Hegelian thought: the linear concept of history, which has the ultimate goal of achievement; it is characterised as a bird’s-eye view of history. As Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne point out; “[i]n Benjamin’s own work, (...) now-time destroys the experience of history as progress, replacing it with the apocalyptic doublet of catastrophe and redemption” (Benjamin and Osborne, 1994, p. xi). Benjamin pursues this primarily through literary criticism. Having now considered the confinement of the individual, I turn my attention to the theme of involuntary memory. It will help us to consider Benjamin’s conception of experience, in such a way that “writing” will become a metonym for experience.

3. Receptiveness and Otherness to Ourselves

I want to address this topic in three stages. First, I need to say something about the particularity of literature. Second, I shall explain the nature of the relation to otherness in connection with Benjamin’s complex understanding of inner-outer relations. Third, I shall then go on, in the light of this, to say something about the nature of involuntary memory.

Benjamin sees the purpose of literary criticism not to be a matter of looking at a text as though it were the ashes of the once-burning thoughts of the author but rather as a matter of working with the fire that is in the text itself. Benjamin celebrates certain forms of literature as a kind of open-ended story but of a form that is different from folklore that passes from mouth to mouth. I think the reason that Benjamin is so concerned with literature is as follows: he realises that experience appears in literature in ways that capture the unknown, the strange, or the secret—namely, otherness to ourselves. Experience in literature is not only something that the writer expresses consciously. Sometimes the strange or the unknown, which the writer herself never thinks of writing, can appear in literature.

As I said above, we do not know what the significant cues for experience are in this modern time. In this respect Benjamin is strongly inspired by Proust. In *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940), which is a *bricolage* of the work of various writers and Benjamin himself, Benjamin quotes Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*:

It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture [our own past]: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach, of intellect, in some material object... which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it

depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die. Marcel Proust, *Way by Swann's* vol. 1. (Benjamin, 1999, p. 403)

Here we need to think about what Proust says: "[t]he past is hidden somewhere outside the realm...of intellect, in some material object". Intellect in this context refers to that part of our memory that we can remember consciously. Proust and Benjamin want to consider the way that experience captures us when we meet such triggers as smells, sounds, and words that are apparently insignificant and trivial but that can, for the "remembering author," become cues. It means that such kinds of experience do not simply accumulate in our own memory but hide outside of our consciousness.⁵

Benjamin points out that Proust thinks that cues for our experience are not found in us but outside us. I want to emphasise that this is not to be understood as something "internal" to the self, not like an other within. In fact, in Benjamin the relation between the internal and the external is not a clear one. For example, for the *flâneur* (the person who strolls along or saunters, perhaps idles) the arcade is inside and outside at the same time. In "The Return of the Flâneur" Benjamin writes: "[Paris/the city] becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlour that encloses him" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 263). In this sense, the boundary of the inward and outward becomes blurred.

To think about this inner-outer relation, let us go back to the stories I discussed earlier the way that being absorbed in a story precedes the producing of another story. As we saw, according to Benjamin, in modern times there is no story and, hence, no experience that can be passed on by word of mouth. Yet, for the remembering author being absorbed in the story is significant. In Benjamin and Proust the sense to recount experience must be to speak of something already lost or forgotten but at a time when they are deeply absorbed in an object itself. Absorption in something material, something outside ourselves—where, for example, this is a "story" of snowing, of the smell of the evening, of the name of a path—must precede experience in Benjamin's sense. Benjamin describes the relation of experience to absorption as one of *mimesis*.⁶ This demonstrates the invasiveness of what is outside into the inside.

Benjamin does not think that our unconscious is something deep inside our consciousness, which perhaps connects people through a collective memory, and which causes the unconscious aspects of our writing. He tries to avoid the idea of undifferentiated unity.⁶ In contrast, Benjamin thinks that a strangeness or otherness can invade us. Because of this, the strange or unknown that writer herself never thinks to write can appear in the literature she produces. In this sense the individual understood as closed and complete in herself needs to be reconsidered. In Benjamin's sense "our" experience might be captured through what is necessarily a having-been-lost or through the immemorial. The "immemorial" refers to what cannot be recovered through the memory, what necessarily escapes its reach—as, for example, in the way that our childhood necessarily extends beyond what we can recall. The past is irretrievable, and it requires a kind of receptiveness from us. Recognising this helps us to realise an otherness not *within* but *to* ourselves.⁸

From this point of view, in "The Image of Proust," Benjamin suggests that it is not the author herself but it is the cues of involuntary memory" that are the subject (or author) of Proust's writings.

For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the

weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? (Benjamin, 1968, p. 198)

Unlike novels, in which readers can identify the individual subject (or author), *In Search of Lost Time* has no such thing. In a sense we can see *In Search of Lost Time* as a kind of fictional autobiography of Proust; however, it is not true that we can know *who Proust is* from this text. Here I want to contrast autobiography as a consolidation of the self with the anti-autobiography to be found in Proust and Benjamin.⁹

In Section 4 I want to say more about the relation between involuntary memory and “muscular activity”, which is crucial to Benjamin’s account of the way that receptiveness turns into expression.

4. Experience in the Duality

To think about this anti-auto-biography, let us draw a contrast. A detective walking along the street will be *actively looking* for clues. From those he collects he develops a picture of a certain person whom he identifies as the subject of a particular, criminal action.¹⁰ The *flâneur*, however, is already on the street, walking without purpose, but because he is *receptive* he can receive cues from insignificant things—say, from the sound of snowing or from the smell of a madeleine. The cues for producing experience are insignificant so “it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not”. However this does not mean that the writer is not active because she willingly goes out—she puts herself in situations where she is receptive, say, by strolling along the street with no particular purpose in mind. We can say that the task of the remembering author is not the completion of a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece has a pre-determined place but rather to seek an unknown constellation of fragments.

As with story, there is the possibility of absorption that enables us to write experience but how we are to receive the cues is different. Whereas, in the case of story, people shared the same cues for experience, in the modern context each person has to find their own cues: this depends upon chance, but it also depends upon the way that their act brings to expression what is prompted by the cues. Benjamin writes:

Smell—that is the sense of weight of someone who casts his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu* (the lost time). And [the remembering author’s] sentences are the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body; they contain the whole enormous effort to raise this catch. (Benjamin, 1968, p. 210)

Obviously smell has no weight, but the remembering author receives smell as a weight. For this, she needs to “surrender knowingly” to involuntary memory; now we can understand involuntary memory as giving the cues for our sense of otherness to ourselves, which in turn are cues for experience in Benjamin’s sense. To surrender means to become absorbed in the object itself, as if one were a child playing. As Yasuo Imai insightfully points out: ‘Surrealists and children alike base their aesthetic experience on the objects that restrict minds, not on the

minds that process the objects subjectively' (Imai, 2003, p. 122).

Here I want to consider involuntary memory in terms of what Benjamin calls our "muscular" activity. This is not a matter of, say, the "auto-writing" found in surrealism; it is our act. In Benjamin's sense the past is irretrievable, and the remembering author is someone who recognises this irretrievability. In "Berlin Childhood around 1900", which might be thought of as Benjamin's *In Search of Lost Time*, Benjamin writes: "I sought to limit [the] effect [of longing] through insight into the irretrievability—not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 344). He also describes the past in "On the Concept of History" which consists of eighteen theses and two supplemental theses. The fifth thesis in this text states:

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognisability, and is never seen again. (...) It is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognise itself as intended in that image (Benjamin, 2003, p. 391).

This image of the past is strikingly different from the Hegelian conception of history. Here it should be emphasised that Benjamin never countenances any absorption into transcendental unity that denies expression in "the language of man".¹¹ Yet he hangs on to the very moment when the irretrievable past appears and vanishes in his own writing. Benjamin tries to explain this through an analogy with fishing: the fish enter our nets but we must use our muscles to pull them in.

In the light of this, Martin Jay demonstrates the relation in literature between characters and their author in such a way as to disrupt any notion of the stability of this relation, and to show rather the tension between them (Jay, 1998, p. 205).¹² Here I want to understand this tension in terms of that which exists between involuntary memory and a writer. Furthermore, Jay characterises the writing style of Benjamin as a "dual style" that enables us to understand ourselves in terms of an inherent duality. Experience cannot arise *only* from the cues offered by what is other to ourselves (say, by what is other to the writer within her own work) or *only* from within ourselves (say, from within the writer herself), but must come also as a state of the duality of them in the same space.¹³ Here it is important to recognise a duality of the self that is not separable into the subject of writing and the object being expressed. Thus this duality refers not to an interaction but to a tension. To stay in the duality is to stay in a state that is unfixed, in a tension between now-time, the moment, and an irretrievable, immemorial time. In this sense, writing might be understood in terms of an act in which we can play out our own role in an ambiguous or tense space.

Now we are in a position to understand Benjamin's conception of experience as the "apocalyptic doublet of catastrophe and redemption", in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne's phrase (Benjamin and Osborne, 1994, p. xi). Then our experience becomes something like a "prophecy". In Benjamin's sense, prophecy is not a future-telling but orientation to "a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 389), namely a writing now-time that is constellated by the resemblance yet unknown. In this sense, we can understand prophecy with regard to this very moment.

The apocalyptic element in Benjamin's thought alludes to religious ideas of revelation and Judgement Day. However Benjamin does not think of Judgement Day or the possibility of

redemption as something that will happen in the future, when the truth of the world is finally revealed, but as what happens here and now, in each moment, where this moment is constellated by an immemorial time. In “On the Concept of History” Benjamin writes: “every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 397). Therefore, I want to understand the apocalypse in terms of prophecy—that is, we are answerable for our act at each and every moment, where this answering creates our now-time, and where it is to be understood as muscular activity. Thus, writing renders a now-time prophecy that constellates the fragments of the irretrievable past. Here we need to think of prophecy itself as “the entire muscular activity” in which a writer receives the cues from what is other to ourselves and words for the past.¹⁴ More precisely, the writer receives the cues, and her writing returns words to the irretrievable past, which itself is the source of those cues. In this respect I want to point out the importance that Benjamin attaches to the intimate relation between remembering and awakening (Benjamin, 1999, p.389).¹⁵

5. Conclusion: Writing Experience in Remembering and Awakening

This paper has sought to examine the idea of experience in Walter Benjamin, especially as this is revealed in his essay on Proust. It began by considering the modern situation in which the individual is confined in itself. To overcome this situation we reconsidered the difference between the inside and the outside of the self, though Benjamin’s outside is no simple opposite of inside. According to Benjamin, experience shows us the unknown or the strange—where experience captures us, other to ourselves. However, it is crucial to recognise that Benjamin considers experience in a “dual style”—that is, in terms of the tension between what is other to ourselves and our own act, as is exemplified in writing. Thus, our act should be understood in terms of receptiveness to now-time. Each moment appears to us with secrets that have no manner of being written yet. In this sense we can call Proust’s text an anti-auto-biography. Benjamin sees Proust as a founder of a new genre of literature or experience, and as a dissolver of existing genres.

What I want to emphasise through Benjamin’s text is not an otherness within ourselves but otherness to ourselves—namely, to something outside ourselves. Otherness can invade the self and destroy our common sense or ordinary being. It can give us (even if we do not want it) the secret of life, which is not to be revealed in any calculative exchange of questions and answers. In this sense, we can say that writing has two aspects of possibility: it destroys our experience, and at the same time it opens a narrow way for our next step in life. In the light of this it becomes possible to see experience not only as a reinforcement of our autonomous selves but as an opening onto the yet unknown, which enables us to touch the depths of our lives beyond usefulness. Walter Benjamin’s conception of experience dispels the notion of experience that is popularly held and that is taken for granted in educational theorising. It takes a step in the here and now. As Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne say; “[In Benjamin’s sense] now-time eschews all ontological reduction by thinking the past in terms of the monadic structure of remembrance” (Benjamin and Osborne, 1994, p. xii). This remembrance could be a trigger for awakening experience, for allowing us, in muscular activity, to write a now-time experience.

In my future work I aim to show the limitations of the self-contained and self-reinforcing forms of discourse that dominate education. Through Benjamin’s work, I want to reconsider the

concept of experience as it appears in educational practice and to find various ways to write about our experience as related to otherness and about its transformation.

Notes

1. The modern novels that Benjamin has most in mind here are those that can be seen more or less as Bildungsroman. These should be differentiated from such modern literature as the works of Proust, Baudelaire, Kafka, Woolf, Joyce, Blanchot and the like.
2. Imai analyses the way that modern technologies influence human perception and change aesthetic experience, in Benjamin's sense (Imai, 2003).
3. Benjamin, however, sees present conditions that have no "aura" ambivalently. See, for example, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).
4. I will say something more about this in section 4.
5. Tsuji says; "according to Benjamin the storyteller of *In Search of Lost Time* is the remembrance itself" (Tsuji, 2009, p. 161).
6. As to Benjamin's theory of mimesis in relation to his conception of experience, see Tsuji (2010).
7. About the dangerousness of this idea of undifferentiated unity, see Jay (1998).
8. Standish (2007) points out the problem of narrative research that is blind or insufficiently alert to our otherness to ourselves. In the present paper, however, I want to consider not "our" otherness to ourselves, which might suggest that otherness is somehow inside us, but an otherness to ourselves that breaks open any sense of unity, because in Benjamin's sense otherness can be characterised as the unknown to us.
9. On the subject of anti-auto-biography, see Tsuji (2010, p. p. 132–135).
10. It is widely known that Freud was inspired by detective stories when he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).
11. The phrase is drawn from Benjamin's essay "On Language as such and on the Language of Man" (1916).
12. Jay's point is considerably more subtle than this, and there is not space to elaborate on this here. I believe it is fruitful nevertheless to draw on his work in the way I do at this point in the paper.
13. Jay tries to characterise what experience is without a subject. He concludes; "experience without the subject turns out to be experience with more than one subject inhabiting the same space" (Jay, 1998, p. 205). He also points out the similarity of Benjamin and Bakhtin in their ways of understanding the space of literature.
14. This muscular activity might be rephrased "awakening". In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes: "awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 389).
15. Benjamin demonstrates this in *The Arcades Project*. He emphasises that "what has been (the past)" becomes something that happened in now-time for the first time.

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